

NEWS ARTICLE

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A Feast for Your Eyes

September is National Eye Health Month and a great time to take a look at what keeps our eyes healthy. Over half of us will suffer vision loss as we age. The leading cause of adult blindness is age related macular degeneration (ARMD), where blood vessels in the back of the eye (the macula) become narrowed, and hardened. ARMD results in degeneration of the macula and causes a loss of central vision. Another common eye problem is cataracts, an opaque (cloudy) area that occurs in the normally clear lens of the eye. Over 1 million people need cataract surgery each year. Is there anything you can do to save your vision? Yes, and it is so easy. Just eat your vegetables (and your fruits too)!

Eat in Color

Color molecules called pigments give fruits and vegetables their beautiful colors. Scientists have found that orange pigments called carotenoids protect your eyes against ARMD and cataracts by acting as antioxidants. Two of these carotenoids, lutein and zeaxanthin are turning out to be the most powerful vision protectants. Broccoli, carrots, corn, tomatoes and certain fruits are good sources of lutein. Dark leafy green vegetables, such as spinach and kale, are good sources of both lutein and zeaxanthin. Corn also has a high concentration of zeaxanthin.

Eat Your Vitamins

Vitamin E is another antioxidant that may help to prevent the formation of cataracts. The Beaver Dam Eye Study found that people with the highest vitamin E levels had the lowest incidence of cataracts.

Vitamin E is found in wheat germ, nuts, seeds, oil, margarine and salad dressing. Remember that these foods are high in calories, so use them in moderation.

Lifestyle Counts

Other ways to help prevent ARMD and cataract formation are to avoid smoking and wear sunglasses. Smoking generates free radicals, which cause oxidative damage to your eyes. Because the harmful ultraviolet rays of the sun can also be damaging, be sure to wear your sunglasses.

Think Color

- Add fresh spinach, corn kernels and broccoli florets to your salads
- Add chopped cooked kale, collard greens or spinach to any pasta sauce
- Use cooked, well drained spinach as a pizza topping

- Make a corn coulis to top grains or rice. Simply puree cooked corn and strain. The creamy yellow sauce is great over rice, cous-cous and vegetables.

The Bottom Line

A diet rich in fruits and vegetables is the best way to be sure to get your fill of the important nutrients to prevent these degenerative diseases of the eye. Eating fruits and vegetables not only helps to prevent ARMD and cataract formation, but has the added benefit for helping to prevent cancer and heart disease. Don't be shy, try a new fruit or vegetable today and see your way to a healthy life ahead.

If you have a question, call Linda Bowman, Family and Consumer Sciences Extension Agent, The University of Florida--Santa Rosa County Cooperative Extension Service--IFAS, at (850)623-3868 or (850)939-1259, Ext. 1360 for south county residents, between the hours of 8:00 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. weekdays. Hearing impaired individuals may call Santa Rosa County Emergency Management Service at 983-5373 (TDD).

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